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Small-Scale Agriculture Today

Office for Small-Scale Agriculture



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U.S. Department of Agriculture • Cooperative State Research Service • Agricultural Research For A Better Tomorrow

AT ISSUE...FARMING IN THE CITY'S SHADOW

Is "metropolitan" the same as "urban"? Many of us tend to associate the city with these words. But 90 percent of the land in areas designated "metropolitan" by the Bureau of Census is actually rural with 44 percent in farms.

While farmers in the city's shadow face their share of problems, they also can exploit opportunities that their country counterparts might relish. Proximity to urban consumers provides direct access to ready-made markets for high-value produce: 76 percent of nursery and horticultural crops, 67 percent of vegetables, sweet corn, and melons; and 65 percent of fruit, nut, and berry sales are made by metro farmers. Ten percent of metro farmers sell directly to the consumer, accounting for 60 percent of U.S. direct-marketing sales and that doesn't include direct sales of nursery and horticultural products.

The important point: As urbanization encroaches on rural areas, the appropriate response is to adapt, not surrender. In metropolitan areas, smaller is better. Under pressure of competition from development, metro farmers sell off unproductive land, abandon land-extensive enterprises, and focus on high-value, intensive production.

The average metro farm is half the size of the nonmetro farm (247 vs. 518 acres) and sells for twice as much per acre (\$243 vs. \$113). Almost 60 percent of metro farms are less than 100 acres, compared with only 37 percent of nonmetro farms. But 40 percent of metro farmland is harvested cropland, compared with only 30 percent for nonmetro farms. Metro farmers take advantage of off-farm employment opportunities with 60 percent working off-farm. The number of metro farms increased 4 percent between 1974 and 1982, while nonmetro farm numbers declined 6 percent.

The important point: It is better to make money on a small farm meeting consumers' demands than to lose money on a big one growing "conventional" crops.

Metro farmers have a golden nest egg. The average value of land and buildings on metro farms is more than twice as high as on nonmetro farms (\$1,429 vs. \$661 per acre). Continuing urban support for land values has meant that only 4 percent of metro farmers had financial problems when 9 percent of nonmetro farmers did. We can expect metropolitan areas, now encompassing 30 percent of U.S. farms and 16 percent of farmland, to grow in the future. Farming will continue in the city's shadow as well, most of it done on small farms.

SOME SURPRISES

"To hear some farmers tell, people moving to the wide-open spaces of Country Living USA sometimes are a little surprised at what comes with country living.

Instead of just picture-perfect blue skies and green fields, they find the rural version of the very things they're trying to escape--noise, dust, odors.

"Farmers have heard complaints about everything from spreading manure on the day of a neighbor's daughter's wedding reception to cleaning out their barns to driving tractors slowly down the road.

"The complaints, coming largely from the newer residents buying large homes with even larger yards, result from a lack of communication and awareness of farming practices, farmers say." ("Yes, Life Is Different Down on The Farm," Howard County Sun, April 26, 1988).

SAVING RURAL AMERICA

"Rural America is in trouble, and farming alone will not save it.

"The words "farm" and "rural" have always been synonymous. The thinking has been that as agriculture goes, so goes rural America. There's nothing wrong with rural America that \$4-a-bushel corn wouldn't fix, goes the saying. Or if Congress would only enact the right farm policy, then everything would be fine.

"No, it won't.

"The gap between rural and metropolitan America is widening. Much of rural America is dying of an empty heart.

"The worst mistake would be to blame the decline on the recent farm crisis or the drought, and to assume everything will be all right as farm prosperity returns. The farm crisis made matters worse, but things weren't all right before, and they won't be afterward.

"The 1970's were the modern golden age of farming. Yet even during that enormous farm prosperity, people were leaving farming, and regions that depend on farming were losing population.

"The exodus will go on. Every indication is that technological change will continue in farming, meaning less labor will be required--and fewer people. Any area that depends solely on farming will continue to decline in population." (Editorial-Des Moines Sunday Register, August 7, 1988).

TOPICS AND TECHNOLOGY

American Chestnut - Now, a biological control for the fungus that devastated the stately trees decades ago. The treatment involves injecting the trees with a mixture of the blight strains containing a virus-like organism. The organism does not kill the fungus but makes the fungus unable to kill American chestnut trees. Contact: Sandra L. Anagnostakis, Plant Pathology and Ecology, The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, New Haven, CT 06504; telephone 203-789-7253

TIP: Autumn Chore - Get in some soil for potting and seed sowing next spring. Early springtime weather is too wet, cold, and miserable for "playing in the soil," and soggy soil is not a good medium for starting seeds or for potting.

Hotline - The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Hotline provides information on the availability of documentation on safe drinking water and accepts requests for some publications. Contact: Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791.

Marketing Christmas Trees - Want to insure a dependable supply of desirable trees before the Christmas season? Contact: Christmas Tree Hotline, Maryland Department of Agriculture, 50 Harry S. Truman Parkway, Annapolis, MD 21401; telephone 301-841-5770.

Economic Development - "Guideline for Rural Economic Development Training" is for use by specialists in designing workshops for local leaders who are seeking help to increase economic activity in their communities. Costs \$10 from Southern Rural Development Center, Box 5446, Mississippi State, MS 39762; telephone 501-325-3207.

TIP: After being ravaged by fire, a forest left on its own may generate several thousand seedlings on a single acre. However, only about 2 percent of those trees will grow to maturity in 60 to 100 years.

Save the Chestnut - The American Chestnut Council is promoting the establishment of new groves to maintain the species. For general information about the tree and seedling sales program write: Wexford County Soil and Water Conservation District, 3060 West 13th St., Cadillac, MI 49601.

Dormant Pruning - During the winter, trees have an active metabolism, even though it is at a low level, and winter pruning stimulates it. To avoid damaging the tree, there are some basic "rule of thumb" procedures to follow. Contact: David A. Kollas, Extension Fruit Specialist, University of Connecticut, Department of Plant Science, 1376 Storrs Road, Storrs, CT 06269-4067; telephone 203-486-1944.

Market What You Grow - An idea book and hands-on workbook for small growers; costs \$9.95. Contact: Randy Whatley, The Chicot Press, Box 5198, Atlanta, GA 30355; telephone 1-800-888-6088.

Agricultural Sales - According to the 1987 Census of Agriculture, \$58.9 billion or 42 percent of total agricultural sales were for crops, while \$77.1 billion or 58 per cent came from the sale of livestock, poultry and their products.

Second Best - In a 1987 survey, peppers were the second most popular garden vegetable (grown by 58 percent of gardeners surveyed). Tomatoes were number one at 85 percent, and onions and/or cucumbers tied for third at 50 percent.

Direct Marketing - A 44-page paper, "Marketing: How to Survive as a Small Farmer", costs \$9.00. Contact: Tom McKinney, Agriculture Program, Rocky Mountain Institute, 1739 Snowmass Creek Road, Snowmass, CO 81654; telephone 303-927-3851.

Prolific - Chinese hogs are "unusually prolific." Their twice yearly litters average 16 to 20 newborn, with a record of 33. To obtain a copy of the press release describing a herd recently admitted to the United States for breeding, APHIS, Public experiments, contact: Margaret Webb, USDA-APHIS, Public Affairs Specialist, Room 615 Federal Building, 6500 Belcrest Road, Hyattsville, MD 20782; telephone 301-436-7799.

Source Information - The catalog of AgAccess is a good up-to-date, indepth book providing comprehensive, readily accessible agricultural information. For a free catalog, contact: David Katz, AgAccess, P.O. Box 2008, Davis, CA 95617; telephone 916-756-7177.

TIP: "The American consumer does not need MORE food, she wants DIFFERENT food. The more standardized and

tasteless our food becomes the more we long for the unusual. While many feel organic food is a negative sell, there are ways to differentiate food in a fun, upbeat way. Virtually any food product that can be marketed as natural or "old fashioned" sells well." (H. Allen Nation, *The Stockman Grass Farmer*)

Flies - When city people move to the suburbs, they sometimes are bothered by pesky flies from a nearby farm and often bad feelings and even lawsuits result. Want to know more about nonchemical control, or better control from established systems? Contact: Ralph A. Bram, USDA-ARS, National Program Leader, Insects Affecting Man and Animal, Bldg. 005 BARC-W, Beltsville, MD 20705; telephone 301-344-2771.

TIP: Dislike the gluey consistency of cooked okra? To prevent it, leave the stem on the pod while cooking. It's edible, or can be cut off at the table.

Good Bug Directory - The fourth edition of "Suppliers of Beneficial Organisms in North America" lists 60 companies that sell biological controls. Among the 60 organisms available are predatory mites, fly parasites, parasitic nematodes, and other organisms to help control pest invasions in orchards, ranches, greenhouses, farms and ornamental gardens. Single copies of the catalog are available free. Contact: California Department of Food and Agriculture, Biological Control Services Program, 3288 Meadowview Road, Sacramento, CA 95832. (The Farm News, June 1989)

Intensive Grazing - This 33-minute video entitled "Voisin Controlled Grazing Management: A Better Way to Farm" costs \$15. An introductory tape, it does not contain specific "how-to's." Contact: University of Vermont Extension, Office of Information, Morrill Hall, Burlington, VT 05406; telephone 802-656-3024.

Tank Mixes - For chemicals of unknown compatibility, growers can conduct a simple test to prevent serious damage to crops or equipment. To obtain a copy of "Procedures for Testing the Compatibility of Tank Mixes", OHC-19, contact: G.E. Fitzpatrick, Extension Specialist, Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center, IFAS-University of Florida, 3205 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314; telephone 305-475-8990.

Farm Trends - The "1989 Agricultural Chartbook," AH-684, is a compilation of 311 charts that track a variety of trends in agriculture. Costs \$8 per copy, check payable to G-ERS-NASS. Contact: ERS-NASS, P.O. Box 1608, Rockville, MD 20849-1608; telephone 1-800-999-6779.

Organic Methods - A library of 25 video tapes (VHS format) on organic methods. Write for free catalog. Contact: Jack Kittredge, NOFA Video Project, RFD 2, Barre, MS 01005; telephone 508-355-2853.

Idea-Maker - 50 Small Farm Ideas, pamphlet costs \$3.75. Contact: B. Berst, National Lilac, 2310 17th, Anacortes, WA 98221; telephone 206-293-3345.

TWO WEEKS IN JULY

One on one is perhaps still the very best way to meet new people and to foster better understanding. Always there are wants and needs; however, without communication, solutions and/or answers are not possible.

As you might know, Congress will be writing a new Farm Bill in 1990. That piece of legislation will be important to all farmers, small and big. You can bet that large-acreage operators will make their needs known. Three occasions in July permitted the Office for Small-Scale Agriculture (OSSA) and people interested in the future of small farms to communicate their unmet needs.

USDA sponsored an informative exhibit on small-scale agriculture at the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC's 89) Annual Meeting, July 16-20, Monterey, CA. ALEC is the largest membership organization of State legislatures in the United States. Herbs' 89, the Fourth National Herb Growing and Marketing Conference convened at San Jose, CA, July 22-25, 1989. OSSA participated in the special information and media display, provided the banquet speaker, and ascertained comments on the needs of small farmers, especially their research needs. On July 23-29, 1989, OSSA helped North Carolina A&T State University, Greensboro, NC, to celebrate Small Family Farms Appreciation Week by attending and participating in several capacities.

More than 1,000 names were added to those now receiving this newsletter.

LIFESTYLE SQUEEZE

"More people-less land to support them! Maybe it's not news to some folks, but the U.S. is facing a dilemma: how are we going to feed, clothe, and shelter our ever sprouting population and still maintain a quality of lifestyle? Recent figures compiled by the federal government reveal some startling projections. Basically this: As our population increases, our supporting land base is decreasing. The solutions: (1) conservation of our increasingly limited resources, conservation means WISE USE not NO USE OR MISUSE, (2) more funds for developing technology to better manage these resources, and (3) population control." (Suburban Farmer, March 14, 1989, p.12)

SEND

Topics, technologies, and calendar of events (yours) to the Office for Small-Scale Agriculture (OSSA). Dialcom-AGS3037 H. Kerr or Fax 202-475-3179.

Please Circulate

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

October 16-17, 1989 - "Unique and Diverse: Educational Programs in Alternative Agriculture.; Thruway House, Albany, NY. Workshop is sponsored by the Cornell Farming Alternatives Project, ES-USDA, and Cooperative Extension Association of the Northeast. Contact: Nancy Grudens Schuck, Warren Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-7801; telephone 315-364-7837.

October 21-22, 1989 - Missouri Small Farmers Gathering, Holden, MO. Contact: Kenneth Elkins, 816-732-4865 or Jim Counts, 818-747-8929.

October 26, 1989 - 11th Annual Fall Vegetable Field Day, Truck Crops Branch Experiment Station, Mississippi State University, Crystal Springs, MS 39056. Contact: Richard G. Snyder 601-892-3731.

October 27-29, 1989 - Second North American Rabbit Congress, Springfield, MO. Contact: John Harkness, P.O. Drawer V, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS 39762; telephone 601-325-3432.

November 3-4, 1989 - Agricultural Alternatives Workshop, Schweitzer Ski Lodge, Sandpoint, ID. Contact: Vickie Parker Clark, Kootenai County Extension, 106 Dalton Avenue, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814-9296; telephone 208-667-6426.

November 14-16, 1989 - National Extension IPM Conference, Capitol Holiday Inn, Washington, DC. Contact: Jere A. Brittain, Program Chairman, 266 Poole Agricultural Center, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634-0375; telephone 803-656-3410.

November 15, 1989 - Aquaculture Conference, Berks County Agriculture Center, Reading, PA. Contact: Jeff Patton, Co-Chair Planning Committee, Room 604 Courthouse, Allentown, PA 18101; telephone 215-820-3085.

November 15-17, 1989 - Rural Families: Change and Continuity, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS. For more information, contact: National Conference Office; telephone 1-800-255-2757.

January 11-14, 1990 - Combined 5th National Direct Marketing and the 30th Annual Ohio Roadside Marketing Conference in Toledo, OH. Contact: Kelso Wessel, ORMC Coordinator, 2120 Fyffe Road, Columbus, OH 43210; telephone 614-292-6413.

(Mention of commercial enterprises or brand names does not constitute endorsement or imply preference by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.)

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